



ELSAH HISTORY

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Cy Bunting Interview

With Donna DeWeese Cornelius



We are here in Cy Bunting's home that was earlier his parent's home.

I was about a year and a half old when we moved here.

What do you remember?

There were kids everywhere.

We were just always carrying around in the woods, hiking, and playing up in these hills. We were all over. We didn't have a lot of games then, you know.

I went to school in the Elsay School. They had a little preschool up on campus in Howard House for a while. Kindergarten type thing. Then I went to first and second grade down in the village school house. Mrs. Siegel was the teacher, a great teacher. She had to teach four grades: first through fourth downstairs and fifth through eighth upstairs.

Mrs. Siegel came from Jerseyville every day.

In third grade, I started going over to Prin, the old campus on Page and Belt in St. Louis. We drove: Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Mitchell drove us over there. We had a big old DeSoto that had a third seat in back that faced backwards. We'd ride over in that.

We lived in Notchcliff A apartment. I actually watched, when I was a little kid, them build Notchcliff B apartments. They built that right after the war for the veterans' apartments, and the service fellas who came back that were married.

My dad was in charge of maintenance, to start out when he first came back, he worked on the landscape crew for a while. I think he made 15 cents an hour, high wages. Then when Bert Clark, was moved over to the St. Louis Campus as business manager, dad took over, actually really everything that wasn't the academic part. It was the food service, security, maintenance, fire protection, student employment, stage crews, all those things came under the, the maintenance department back then. It was located right where the School of Government building was, right in the middle of campus.

Did you also work maintenance later on?

Oh, when we started out, when we were working when we were 9 or 10. We used to have all the

brick sidewalks up on campus, we were labor, scoop all the drawings up.

Cy, I think you have an interesting history of Elsah where you can remember what it looked like before the River Road was built, is that right?

Absolutely, because it was completely different back in those days. You have to remember the River Road wasn't there. All that was there was a single railroad track just below the bottom of the bluff, and Elsah was a little wider. There was the big brick building down there in front of the Riverview House. There was a rail siding and underground oil tanks down there that they would push the tank cars off on. It was used for storage of heating oil for the college because all their heat was heavy oil, and so they would drain those tank cars in underground tanks, so there was a little brick building down there, and they would pump the oil up the hill to the campus. And there were some storage tanks up there behind Watson and down behind Morey Field House. That's how they got the oil here. So when you came in to Elsah, you came in from the North end, going to Jerseyville. Beltrees Road was a gravel road back in those days, so it wasn't something that you really wanted to travel a whole lot on. So you came in from the North. And most of the traffic, if it was for the college, it came down to the four-way stop, went up the hill. So from the four-way stop down to the river, there was very little traffic. The two grocery stores were down there. It was Spatz's store and Keller's store first. And the Spatzes sold the one store to the Prathers, and they ran that for most of the time I was growing up. So there were two grocery stores and one gas pump down there. Then nobody else went down there unless you were going down to the store, and they delivered. So people up on the campus could call down to the store, and order the stuff they wanted. They would deliver it up to your house. Of course, milk and things were delivered. The old dairy delivered to your home so you didn't have to go to the store to get milk and butter and stuff like that.



Do you remember the Dinky?

I remember the Dinky. The Dinky's over, across the river at the Museum of Transport, so you can go over and see it. But you could actually get on the Dinky here at Elsah, and ride it to Alton and there was a railroad station right there by the gambling boat. You would get off the Dinky there, and get on a train to take you into downtown St. Louis so you could go shopping if you wanted to, by train. Then come back by the Dinky at night. But Nancy McDow's dad, for a long time, actually was the guy that ran the Dinky.

What about the hotel that's next to the Museum now that burned down? What was the name of that?

I don't know what the name of that was. But Lucy McDow was there when I was growing up.

Do you remember Lucy McDow?

Oh yeah, we called her Miss Lucy. She always had a big garden right down over the side near where the gazebo is now. She sold newspapers

The buildings were used in different ways back then. The Village Inn was the college guest house. They had a restaurant in the basement there. My mother-in-law was one of the waitresses down there. And my girlfriend for four years' mother was there, and ran it for - they were from California. Mrs. Ives, she ran the Village Inn.

Where did they serve their meals?

Oh yeah, they had nice meals. You could get steak and stuff, too if you ordered ahead of time. It was basically for Prin guests, you know. They were here for school. They had rooms upstairs. The Victorian room was the big room downstairs, right inside the front door. And they lived in the two rooms in the back.

Who owned it?

The college.

Did somebody in particular run it or manage it?

Yeah, Mrs. Ives. The Haupts, Dr. Ted Haupt and his wife, did it for a number of years before that. He was professor at the college and eventually a dean at the college. They had great hamburgers.

How long was the Village Inn there?

Oh yeah, whole time I was growing up. It was there until I guess the Bradleys, probably going up until they built the Guest House up on campus.

So what do you remember eating there that you liked?

I always liked the hamburgers. I'd go down there with the fella who drove the bus to St. Louis, Bob Lowder, who lived here in Elsah, worked on landscape crew. His wife was a cook, so Bob would be down there every night, and have dinner when he got back off the bus, which was about 5. I'd sometimes go down there, and sit back there and eat with him. You know, they had nice meals. The house across from them at that time didn't have the addition on the back side of it. So you'd look out across the river. You could see the river, and I remember one time when there was a flood, and there were some guests there who'd never been here before. They were sitting in the dining room looking out at the river. Some of the kids from the college used to walk up and down the back road. They all didn't have cars back in those days. A couple of these kids were out there on the railroad tracks which were just an inch and a half or two inches under water. So you're looking out there out the window, and all you could see was water and

they were walking on the rails, one foot, the other balancing. They looked like they were walking across the river. People made a comment, I think they took the picture. It was kind of cute.



Cy on the bus to Principia campus in STL.

That was still before the River Road was there?

Yeah, that would have been probably 1948.

What was the old Village Hall like before it became the Museum? Did people voted there?

Town meetings, yeah, there were just benches, chairs in there, a little stage. The village board would sit up on the stage. That's where they would have the village meetings because the other was the schoolhouse. When I went to school there, they didn't have the addition on there, where they meet now. It was just the upstairs and the downstairs, and the outhouse out behind.

I heard there were some occasions when Principia would bring meals down there, like a turkey dinner or something. What was that about?

The campus used to be closed back in those days. We were all isolated out here. When the little village school was there, and they'd have things, we'd get the stage crew to bring lights down and things and record stuff, movie projectors or something for things because they didn't have all that stuff down here.

It sounds like a different time, people getting together more and doing things.

Do you remember the first big flood that you experienced here?

Probably 1948 that I remember going out on a canoe on the river with dad.

One time I saw you out on the wetlands in 2019 in a canoe, and I was thinking, I wonder if Cy did that as a kid. This was during the flood, but it looked like you were having fun in that little boat.

Ryan's got my canoe. I remember back, I used to go out in a canoe, but I don't do that any more. We used to go out, when we were growing up, we kept our boats tied up in the creek down there.



Was there more water?

Well, see, before the River Road was there, there were just a wooden railroad trestle across the creek so the oil trucks and stuff, after the railroad shut down, they had to bring that oil in for the college by big tank trucks. They would have to go down and drive across the bridge to get to where the oil tanks were. And there were trees kind of along the bank of that stream, and we'd tie our boats up and put a chain around them, rope around, tie them to the trees. Nobody'd bother them. Nobody was down there. You know, we just left the boats tied up in the creek. When you wanted to go out, we'd just go down and get your boat and go out.



Did you go fishing? What did you catch?

Yes. Usually catfish or perch.

Could you swim in the river back in those days?

Well, we did. It was probably dirtier then than it is now. There was a fellow who lived down on the bank of the river, just on the other side of the railroad tracks. His house was down on the other side of the railroad. He was a commercial fisherman. He used let us use his boat. He had probably a 30-horse[power] motor on his boat which was really a big motor, you know. Most of the rest of them were 5, 6, 10 horse, you know. He had an old surfboard we'd pull behind his boat. He'd let us use it and go out on the river.



Photos of Cy and friends on the river before the Great River Road was built.

And when they built the River Road originally, Mill Street went down right straight through where that parking lot is now. It went right up to the River Road. And the problem was that it joined the River

Road right by that bridge. People would pull up there and you couldn't see if a car was coming because the bridge railing was in the way. We had quite a few accidents down there. A little girl got killed, had a wreck and ended up in the water on one side. So after the little girl accident, my dad and I went down and we took pictures, kept telling them, you know, three accidents in one day. We took pictures.

When were you police chief?

Somewhere around 1970, late 60s.

I guess you saw a lot of things during that job, right?

Yeah. It was different because back in those days, you had no good radio communications. You were kind of out there by yourself. You were lucky if you could maybe get Calhoun County on the radio. It was a little different. We took photographs of a car coming up the River Road. When the car was on the bridge, you couldn't see it when it passed you. My father convinced the state that that was a dangerous intersection. So they came down and moved it, put it up there in the parking lot where it is now. Then they dug and took all that sand out when they put the ramp going up there, filling up the hold behind that house where the Corner Nest is.

Did you raise your own children in Elsay too?

Yeah. I had three girls. A bunch of my friends, mayor Delby Darr, they had two girls. Ronnie Cresswell had two girls. You were beginning to think there was something in the water. There were no boys. But there were a lot of kids back then.

Your dad was in Principia College's first graduating class?

From the college up here, in 1935. He came back in 1944 is when we moved. He had been in Pittsburgh working for a friend. He worked for a telephone company. He came back here, so that was in 44 when we moved here.

And you were always volunteering at the fire department, too?

The college had the only fire department for years. The fire district wasn't formed until [19]67. We had two fire trucks, a 35 Ford fire truck for years, then a 64 GMC. 1950 Jeep fire truck. It was a cute little thing used for brush fires. Once they got two trucks, the insurance company didn't want both trucks off the campus. So we got two down in the village to put out our fires. When I was probably in 6th or 7th grade we had a series of brush fires for about three or four weeks. Somebody was setting them. They were out at night almost every night on these hills putting them out. And when the railroad was there, every now and then the old locomotive I guess would throw a spark out or something right because they're right underneath the bluff. But you know there wasn't a whole lot going on in town.

There were a lot of structures at that time that are no longer existing, right? Like even next to the house right in the front, Riverview House, it looks like in older pictures, there was a building to the left of it.

Well there was a big brick building in front of it. And then if you were standing facing it, to the right, there was a white house, there's a kind of a ridge, if you look at it, there when you go around the corner. In fact it's where we had the fire trucks sitting during the last thing.

What happened to a lot of these buildings?

Well that house, because it'd get flooded every time the water came up. It was a summer cottage.



How did you become mayor of Elsie? Were you always into politics?

Well not really. Lynn Schreiber was mayor and put me on the Village Board.

So she was the mayor before you? So you got elected?

Well, I had to serve two years of her term, and then I had to get elected. So I ran six years altogether.

What were some of your highlights from your time as mayor?

Well, the worst part was I didn't have a treasurer. Lynn Schreiber's husband was treasurer and he left. And the gal that was on the board that was going to be the clerk wouldn't do it. I can't remember her name. She's great but she was Dave Pfeifer's secretary up at the college in the President's office. She was leaving that job to go run the Guest House. She was having to train for the Guest House and wasn't there to train her replacement going into his office. She said I just haven't got the time, so I didn't have a clerk then, so it was me.

You did a lot of the jobs yourself?

I did everything. Trying to find somebody wanting to do them, it wasn't that easy. The time was kind of transition. But it worked out. And I learned a lot because it gave me an idea of what was going on with the finances of the village. I never asked too many questions about what had happened. But they had done something - they lost a grand or something before, and the village was basically kind of broke when I took over. They didn't even pay the \$30 to the board members. They'd stopped doing that. So I was doing the mayor's job and I was working with Randy all the time because he was the only maintenance guy that we had. So I was spending hours a day out fixing roads and roads were in bad shape. A lot of buildings needed new roofs. They hadn't replaced a lot of them. The roads needed repair, everyone was starting to complain about the roads. We spent two years basically just patching the roads, trying to get them built back up,

so that when we spent the money to asphalt them, we weren't just asphaltting over the holes.

That's a big job.

We were out there every day. And we bought a new tractor and lawn mower. We bought a little lawn tractor which really wasn't adequate for the job. But I guess nobody knew. When I ran maintenance up at the college, you bought equipment to do the job. It's not like doing a house. I actually mowed places. The maintenance guy Bob Smith ended up having a stroke and had to stop working.

You were very well regarded when you were mayor. Why did people like you?

I don't know. I tried not to argue with people. I had a couple that argued with me all the time.

So you were just keeping the peace.

I bought a new tractor and a mower. I don't want to fight when you need to do something. And if somebody needed something done, we argued once before when one of the other maintenance guys was here. If he liked you, he'd help you. But if you weren't on his list, he just didn't pay attention to you. And we talked about some stuff and we got the equipment. If somebody needs a scoop of dirt or a driveway graded out, you know, why don't we just do it instead of them having to call somebody to come in here? I mean, nobody owned a mile-long driveway.

So you would help everyone.

We'd try to do it that way, and then they didn't want to do that. This was before I was mayor. After I took over, I just kind of did things. If somebody needed something, you'd just do it. I wasn't getting paid. I got \$100 a month. And I had to do everything in that office. I figured I was \$100 all the time I spent out mowing or doing road work and stuff.

I bought a new police car, a new tractor, upgraded things. Put a roof on the museum. Put a roof on the school house, a metal roof. I don't know if I showed

you a picture. You've seen Farley's Music Hall,
back when I took over as mayor, you couldn't see it.
The creek back there was full of trees and weeds
and you couldn't see Farley's. Dug the creeks out.

What are your hopes for the future of Elsay?

To preserve its history.

Thank you for your time Cy.



Cy with his 9 grandsons



Cy with his Daughter Jennifer Bunting and her 3 sons



Cy's parents Ellen and Cyrus A. Bunting

5 Decades of Stoneware in Elsah

HEF President Donna DeWeese Cornelius recently sat down to chat with **Jan and Jonathan Wright, of Crocker & Springer Pottery, an Elsah fixture since 1987.**



Crocker & Springer Salt-Glazed Stoneware and Redware.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: Before “Crocker & Springer,” what inspired your passion for creativity?

Jan: Both Jon and I were very creative growing up. In my case, I didn’t want to read books. I just wanted to make things. I spent my free time making Christmas ornaments, dollhouse miniatures, gifts, Halloween costumes, you name it. And I lived for school projects – the more, the better! Coincidentally, as kids, Jon and I both attended summer camp at Crystal Lake Camps in Pennsylvania, where we each took a pottery class for the first time!

Jonathan: I had a natural curiosity in my childhood, and I remember looking at an antique salt-glazed pitcher on top of my mother’s corner cabinet and wondering how it had been made. In college, I saw an article about a large pottery in the Midwest that was making antique-style salt-glazed pottery.

The quality of the work was technically good, but it didn’t look like the antiques. I was curious as to

why the modern reproductions looked so controlled and cold. Jan and I soon started making salt-glazed stoneware ourselves and realized that we could play with the process to try to duplicate the character of the antiques.

Donna: How did you two meet?

Jan: We met in 1981 at Principia College, here in Elsah. Jon and I were both studio art majors and became fast friends. Five years later, we were married. From the very beginning, we wanted to make a living doing something creative together.

We thought about building furniture, because Jon is also a talented woodworker. But we would have needed more equipment, and finishing furniture didn’t appeal to me. So we chose pottery instead, where we could happily combine our skills – Jon could “throw” the pots (form them on a potter’s wheel), and I could paint them. It was a natural fit, and relatively easy to begin, since Jon already had a potter’s wheel and access to the salt kiln he’d built on campus as a student. So we started our business in March of 1987, four months after marrying.



Jon throws a 2-Gal. Beehive Jug on the potter’s wheel.

Photo credit: Jan Wright



Jan slip-trails a floral motif onto a 2-Gal. Ovoid Jar.

Photo credit: Jonathan Wright

Donna: *How did you come up with the name, “Crocker & Springer?”*

Jonathan: The two names came from my mother’s family. Her maiden name was Springer, and my grandmother’s was Crocker, which happens to be a synonym for Potter. One possible Middle English definition of Springer is someone who lived by a spring. I grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where stone springhouses were historically built over springs, providing storage for fresh food in stoneware crocks, nested in the cool water.

Donna: *What does the term “salt-glazed” mean?*

Jan: Salt-glazing is an old German process which originated in the Rhine Valley between the 13th and 15th centuries, eventually coming to America with the European settlers. In this process, salt is blown into a 2,300°F kiln, immediately changing from solid to liquid to gas, then breaking apart chemically. Sodium from the salt bonds with silica in the clay, forming a thin layer of clear glass on the surface of the pottery.

Jonathan: But salt-glazing is hard, and the results are unpredictable. It’s not for the faint of heart. We’ve picked the most difficult of the most difficult avenues to travel. Modern ceramic practices are all about control, predictability and repeatability, which can be more easily achieved with a computer-controlled kiln. We surrender control with salt-glazing.

Jan: And yet that’s kind of the beauty of it – both the joy and the frustration. You have to be a little crazy to salt-glaze!

Jonathan: I’m not crazy.

Jan: (laughing) Well, let’s just say you’re really creative!



Jon loads the large salt kiln, one piece at a time.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: *What kind of salt do you use?*

Jan: We’ve used rock salt, pickling salt, table salt, but what we’re using now is very fine popcorn salt.

Jonathan: It disperses better in the kiln and takes less heat energy to break down into a gas.

Donna: *How do you create the unique coloration of the pottery? It can be light, or golden, or even burnt umber. Do you have control over that, or is it a firing process?*

Jonathan: We have some control, but not complete control. We spray various liquid clay “slips” onto the surfaces of the pots to encourage them to go lighter or darker. I’ve also created my own acronym, TAPS, referring to temperature, atmosphere, placement in the kiln, and “salt-ability.” I make educated guesses as to where to place specific pieces when packing the kiln, to aim for one color versus another, shiny surfaces versus matte, etc. But there are always surprises when we open the kiln.



The always-magical kiln opening!
Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: *How do you know how to stack the pots in the kiln, and what to put in first?*

Jonathan: We recognize that there are good and bad spots for certain pieces. Some zones in the kiln which are 50° to 100° hotter are good for larger objects. Pots at the back of the kiln tend to pick up less salt-glaze. Objects that benefit from wood ash and a heavier salting go around the sides and front. The most special pieces need to be protected in the center.

Donna: *What are the basic steps in the process of making your pots?*

Jan: Mixing the clay, homogenizing it to remove air, throwing pots on the wheel, spraying slip onto the outer surfaces, glazing interiors with a different type of slip, painting cobalt slip decorations onto the pieces, drying, and then firing.

Donna: *So the pots have to be dried out?*

Jonathan: Yes, the clay needs to be mostly dry before it goes into the kiln. It’s ideal to have weeks of drying time first.



Jan carves tulips onto a Distelfink Bank, before the firing.

Photo credit: Jonathan Wright



The finished Distelfink Bank, an original design. Wheel-thrown by Jon, with Jan's hand-sculpted distelfink bird, cobalt brushwork, and sgraffito-carved tulip decorations.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: How do you know which shapes to make, and how many?

Jan: It's often driven by orders, and we always make extras for general inventory. But sometimes we just feel like doing something different, so we create new items to expand our offerings.

Donna: So it's a collaborative effort – you might suggest a certain form, and Jon might suggest trying a new decoration?

Jan: That's right. We're always looking for new ideas for reproductions, adaptations, and original

pieces. Sometimes a customer finds an antique and sends us a picture saying, "Could you make one like this for me?" Sometimes we take inspiration from antiques, but alter our creations to our own liking. And sometimes they're completely original, though made in the antique style.



The 2-Gallon Ovoid Whale Jug.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: I'm seeing a whaling motif on one of these pieces. How did you happen upon that?

Jan: We found a whaling scene in a book about 25 years ago, so we made a jug with a similar motif on it. We used that piece in an ad in Early American Life magazine, and people went nuts for it. We've made a lot of those, and while they're similar to each other, they're never exactly the same, because they're all hand-painted onto hand-thrown pots. We don't use stencils or molds.

Donna: Back to throwing the pots, do you start with a round piece of clay?

Jonathan: I actually start with a cylindrical piece. After pressing the clay onto the wheelhead and drizzling water liberally over it, I let it spin, center it, then open up the clay. The fingers of my left hand work inside the cylinder, while the right hand counters with pressure from outside, moving the clay up and down, compressing and lifting it into whatever shape I have in mind.



A wee-hours view of the salt kiln during the 40-hour-long firing.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: Why did you decide to build your own kiln, rather than buying one?

Jan: Jon has built all of our salt kilns over the years, with the help of various friends. You need a specialized kiln to salt-glaze. If you were to throw

salt into an electric kiln, for instance, the salt would eat up the light-weight insulating brick and metal elements inside the kiln, destroying the kiln and burning down your building! Ready-made salt kilns are expensive, so why buy when you have a resident engineer like Jon Wright?!

Donna: How did you learn to build salt kilns?

Jonathan: Having a natural proclivity toward pyromania, I indulged myself by studying lots of books specifically on kiln-building. As a student, I found a pile of bricks at the college that looked useful, so I dug them out from the weeds and built a very small kiln.



Flames shoot out of a stoke hole during the kiln-firing.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

That was exciting, so I went to the next level and built a bigger kiln. And then a few years later, we built our own studio (the current studio on Beltrees Road in Elsay), complete with a very large wood-burning kiln which held about 1,000 pieces. After a few years, we tore that one down and built a series of smaller salt kilns which have proven to be more manageable.

Donna: How hot does the kiln need to get during the firing? Then how cool should it be before opening it up?

Jonathan: About 2,300°F, and we have to wait until it cools to about 150° before we can open it. Room temperature is preferable, and it can take up to three days to reach room temperature.



Jon takes a peek inside the kiln as the firing progresses.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: Your two children must have enjoyed this creative environment.

Jan: Yes, both our son Nathan and daughter Eleanor enjoyed growing up in our studio, and they are very creative to this day. As a child, Eleanor constantly had a trail of creative chaos behind her. The things she made were priceless!

Donna: I understand you made an ornament for the White House Christmas Tree, and Eleanor drew a picture for the President?

Jan: Yes, in 1999, we were invited to make an ornament for the 20-foot-tall Blue Room Christmas Tree, which would become part of the permanent collection of the White House. We made a 6.5-inch Harvest Jug with Cornucopia decoration, a nod to America as the “land of plenty.” Eleanor was six

years old at the time, and she drew a picture of the White House, which she hoped to give to the President while we toured the house that Christmas. We didn’t get to meet him, so after returning home, I wrote a thank you note and included Eleanor’s drawing. I sent these to the Social Secretary’s assistant, figuring she’d say, “How cute,” before throwing them away. But a couple weeks later, Eleanor received a hand-signed letter from President Clinton, thanking her for her drawing and encouraging her in her school work! The moral of the story is, always send a thank you note!



The White House Ornament – a Miniature Harvest Jug, with a quarter at the base, showing its scale.

Photo credit: Jan Wright

Donna: You also make redware. Is the process much different?

Jonathan: There's a huge difference. The redware-forming technique is child's play, while salt-glaze is serious work. We've added redware to our offerings because of the beauty of the antique folk art, the

contrasting colors which compliment our stoneware line, and the ease of making the work, mostly using a slab roller. Our red clay mix consists of 50% local Elsah clay, blended with 50% Ohio clay. We use colored clay surface slips and oxides to create a palette of fall colors, then finish the pieces with a carefully formulated glaze. We fire the redware in a small, computer-controlled, electric kiln to about 1,800°F (500° cooler than the salt kiln). It's a nice thing to do in the winter when it gets colder in our shop, and is therefore harder to throw pots on the wheel.

Donna: *You recently returned from a show. Is that how you sell your work? How do you reach the public?*

Jan: Shows are a big part of our marketing efforts, though we don't do as many as we once did. Interestingly, folks drop into our rural studio from all over the country. They spot our work in magazines, gift shops, historic sites, or on our Facebook page. We've been in business over 37 years now, so the cat's out of the bag!

Donna: *Your studio is in such an idyllic setting. You can look out any window and see beauty.*

Jan: Yes, we're fortunate in that regard. When we built this building, we didn't really expect to stay in the area. But here we still are! We never dreamed, all those years ago, that our pottery would be so well received, for such a long time. It's been wonderful to see our hard work pay off, after years

of jumping difficult hurdles. And it's been extremely gratifying to have a new generation of collectors interested in what we make. Lately we've been hearing from the children, and even grandchildren, of some of our original customers, who wish to add to the collections they've inherited. I can't think of a higher compliment than to have our work passed down from one generation to the next. We are very blessed, indeed!



Jonathan and Jan Wright.

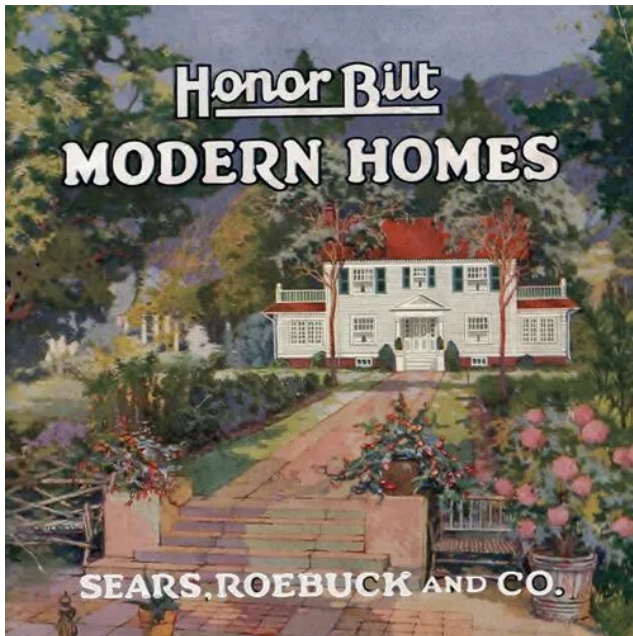
Photo credit: Sun Smith-Foret

Crocker & Springer, Ltd. is located at 25337 Beltrees Road, Elsah, and is open by chance or appointment. Feel free to drop by, or call, text, or email to make an appointment: 618-466-8624, jonjanwright@gmail.com.

Sears Homes in Elsau

By Rosemary Thornton

After my first book on Sears kit houses was published in 2002, a few folks from Elsau contacted me to tell me about a Sears House in the small village. Excitedly, I jumped in my car and made the drive from my home (in Godfrey) to take a look for myself.



What is a Sears kit house? In the early 1900s, Sears sold just about everything you can imagine in their 1,400-page, 100,000-item catalog, including entire kit homes. After selecting the perfect house, buyers were asked to send in a \$1 "good faith" deposit to Sears Roebuck in Chicago, and by return mail, the hopeful homeowners received a Bill of Materials List and full set of blueprints. If you liked what you saw, you'd send in the balance of your money, and that \$1 deposit was credited toward the final purchase price.

A few weeks after the order was placed, a boxcar containing 12,000 pieces of house would arrive at a nearby train depot and then be moved to a siding. Potential homeowners were notified and given 48 hours to unload the boxcar, and this is

the reason that Sears Homes are usually found within 1-2 miles of railroad tracks - logistics!

From 1908-1940, Sears sold about 70,000 houses and offered 370 designs - everything from two-room cottages to 3,000 square-foot Colonials. Prices ranged from \$500 to about \$6,000.

Finding these homes today is a challenge, as Sears destroyed the sales records during a corporate housecleaning in the 1940s. There are several folks (like me) throughout the country who have memorized the stylistic details of those 370 designs, and can identify Sears Homes *mostly* by sight, but it's a slow process. In addition to Sears, there were five other national companies selling kit homes through mail-order catalogs. Their names were Gordon Van Tine (based in Davenport, Iowa), Lewis Homes, Aladdin Homes and Sterling Homes (all in Bay City, Michigan) and Harris Brothers (Chicago). About 75% of the time, houses that are misidentified as "Sears Kit Homes" turn out to be a kit home from one of these lesser known companies. Including these other companies, about 250,000 kit homes were built nationwide in the early 1900s.

The most important "clue" when looking at a possible Sears Home is the build date. If it was built after 1940 or before 1908, it's not a Sears Home.

So what did I find in Elsau?

The first house that caught my eye was a white bungalow on LaSalle Street, with a gabled dormer centered on a side-gabled roof. This style is known as a "craftsman-style bungalow." (An aside, "craftsman-style bungalow" does not mean it has any affiliation with Sears. They offered a line of tools by the same name, but that's where the connection stops!) After studying this house and comparing it with similar designs offered by Sears (and other other kit home companies), I was able to confirm that it's not a kit house.

The second house is a 1920s bungalow on Cemetery Road with clipped gables, a through-the-cornice dormer, and marginal lites. It's also from the right time period, but (sadly) it does not appear to be a kit home.

The third and fourth houses (on Mill Street) are both early 20th century cottages with pyramidal hip roofs. How many hours of my life did I spend staring at these two houses and comparing them to the kit-home catalogs I possess? Too many hours to count! Through the years, several people have told me that these might be kit homes, but I'm not able to identify them as such.

After I'd started work on this article, a couple folks mentioned yet another "possible kit home" on Alma Street. The modest yellow cottage has been beautifully remodeled but despite a thorough inspection, I was unable to affirm that it has any ties to Sears or the other national kit home companies. County records put the build date at 1950, yet a local historian said she thought it was built in the late 1930s.

In conclusion, despite some digging, I was not able to confirm that there are any kit homes in Elsah. Could I be wrong? Absolutely! So if you're living in a house that you think might be a kit home, what can you do?

Start by looking at the framing lumber (most easily seen in the basement). Sears (and other kit home companies) put a letter and/or number on the framing members to facilitate construction. These many years later, that marked lumber can help identify a kit home. Look for shipping labels behind millwork. These labels might say, "Sears & Roebuck, Chicago, Illinois."

Plumbing, electrical and heating equipment were not included with your kit home, but typically, buyers would order these items out of the catalog when they ordered their house. If you look under an original sink or tub and see "SR" next to the casting date, then you probably have a plumbing fixture that came from Sears.

Heretofore, no kit homes have been identified in Elsah, but what Elsah does have is a breathtakingly beautiful village that's filled with historic architecture and vintage shops and delightful residents.

If you think you have a kit home, contact Rose at Magnolia2047@gmail.com.

Bio:

Rosemary Thornton is the author of several books on mail-order kit homes. She and her books have been featured on PBS History Detectives, CBS Sunday Morning, A&E's Biography, MSNBC and more.

The Belvedere

By Rosemary Thornton



In the mid-1800s, one of the most popular housing styles in America was the Italianate and many of these impressive and ornate homes featured a “belvedere” on top of the home’s primary roof.

Often misidentified as a “cupola” the primary difference between a cupola and belvedere is size. While both served to provide ventilation to the house, a belvedere is the bigger of the two, and is typically the size of a small room (approximately 8x10) with a ceiling height of about seven feet or more. Windows are typically floor-to-ceiling.

An Italian word, “belvedere” means “beautiful sight or beautiful view.”

The belvedere was more than just a good-looking room sitting high on a beautiful home; the opened windows in the belvedere would allow the hot summer air to escape, and thus draw in cooler air on the lower floors.



In many Italianates, this small room also held a lead-lined oak water tank, which in the early years of municipal waters systems (with their dramatic swings in water pressures), provided a steady head pressure to the delicate plumbing fixtures below.

One of the village’s older homes is a classic Italianate with a spacious belvedere, replete with tall arched windows (hinged on the side) and open inward, for maximum ventilation. Built in 1858, the house retains its belvedere which (thanks to an earlier remodel) now has electricity and a small lamp. Located on Lasalle Street, the belvedere offers expansive views of the surrounding landscape and the nearby Mississippi River.

**Bio:**

Rosemary Thornton is the author of several books on mail-order kit homes. She and her books have been featured on PBS History Detectives, CBS Sunday Morning, A&E's Biography, MSNBC and more.

HEF News

Greetings from Historic Elsah Foundation! In the new issue there are two interviews. The subjects are Cy Bunting, raised in Elsah since he was 1½ years old. He held the office of Mayor serving for two terms from 2011 – 2017. Jan and Jonathan Wright are featured in the other interview. You will hear how they create pottery in their studio for their company Crocker and Springer. *(On July 16th torrential rains and flooding swept through Jan and Jonathan Wrights' studio, much of their inventory was destroyed. An effort is underway by friends and neighbors to provide assistance for recovery of their loss. They are grateful for the generous help they are receiving.)* There are two articles written by Rosemary Thornton on Sears Homes and Belvederes are included and are of great interest.

The 2023 Home for the Holidays Christmas tour brought a record number of visitors. We appreciate all those who have contributed to HEF and volunteered to make this a success. Kudos to Blair Smith longtime board member, secretary and organizer for the many aspects that make the annual tour a success. The next Holiday Tour is planned for Saturday December 7, 2024.

Past President Tim Tomlinson spearheaded the Hosmer Williams lecture series for 2023-24. The series started off with a fascinating lecture called “Meeting Mike: Mammoth or Mastodon?” by Andrew Martin Assistant Professor of Archeology at Principia College showing the recent second mammoth discovery on the Principia College campus. In April Tim Tomlinson spoke about the history of the Illinois Chautauqua community. Guest hosts for the Hosmer Williams Lecture Series were Niklas Peschke who introduced Andrew Martin and former President of Principia College, John Williams, who introduced Tim Tomlinson and has graciously agreed to introduce the two upcoming speakers in the Fall. George Provenzano will present the story of James Semple on September 19th and Scott Adams will talk about completion of the River Road on October 17th. Both start at 7pm.

“A Visit to the 1904 World’s Fair” presented by Jason Stratman begins our 2025 lecture series on January 30, 2025. Jason is the Library Outreach Manager for the Missouri Historical Library in St. Louis.

Special events:

Be sure to come to silent movie night on July 27th at 7 pm at Farley’s Music Hall where we will be showing “Steamboat Willie” and “Safety Last”. Later in November HEF will be hosting a community Thanksgiving dinner on (11/2/24).

On July 16th torrential rains and flooding conditions hit Elsah. Floodwaters damaged the side porch and entered into the main room. We are working to clean and restore these areas. Please renew your membership. Keeping up your membership and your donations are necessary in maintaining Farley’s Music Hall, for educational talks, lectures and other events. New members and volunteers are always welcome.

Thank you to our members for your support. Have a wonderful summer!

Warm regards,

Donna DeWeese Cornelius

President

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We would like to thank outgoing board members for their service:

Cecily Lee, former editor Elsay History

Melody Hauf-Belden, Principia Archivist

Colleen Turkal, special events and data management.

And welcome our new members:

Steve Hall

Nick Hutchens

Memberships:

Student	\$25
Supporter	\$50
Patron	\$100
Founder's Circle	\$250
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